

5 Free and Open-Source Software Alternatives for Small Businesses

Jolie O'Dell

(Mashable)

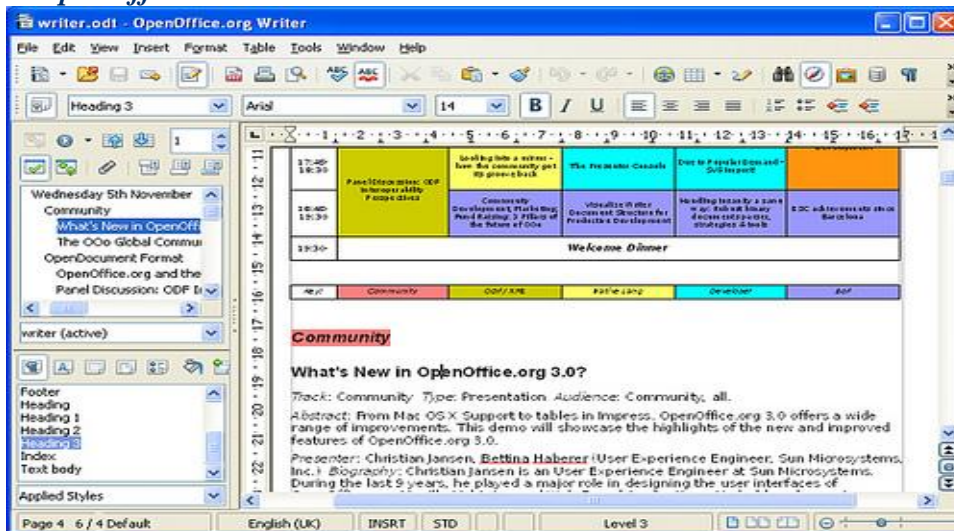


Jun 11, 2010 - If you're part of a small business, chances are you're always looking for ways to save money. What many business owners and managers don't realize is that they can get all the software they need to run a business—quite literally all of it in most cases—100 percent free of charge. That includes operating systems, word processing programs, accounting software, email servers, graphic design programs and more.

If you put in some time to do some research, you might find perfectly free software alternatives that work just as well as Microsoft Office, Adobe Photoshop, QuickBooks, and other better-known programs.

Best of all, since FOSS is free to download and try, there's no risk in testing it out. Take a look at some of these programs and see if a few of them would fit your business needs. You lose nothing by giving them a try, and if they are a good fit, you could save hundreds or even thousands of dollars in licensing fees and upgrades.

1. OpenOffice



OpenOffice is an open-source alternative to Microsoft Office and similar software suites. It's absolutely free to download, and it contains programs for word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, graphics databases and more.

The interfaces are familiar and intuitive; in other words, even if you happen to realize you're not in MS Word, you won't feel lost or not know which buttons to click to get your work done. It is available in many languages and works on all common operating systems.

2. *GNUCash*



The screenshot shows the GnuCash Accounts window. The window title is "<no file> - Accounts". The menu bar includes File, Edit, View, Actions, Business, Reports, Tools, Windows, and Help. The toolbar contains Save, Close, Open, Edit, New, and Delete. The main area displays a tree view of accounts with columns for Account Name, Description, and Total. The tree is expanded to show the following accounts and their balances:

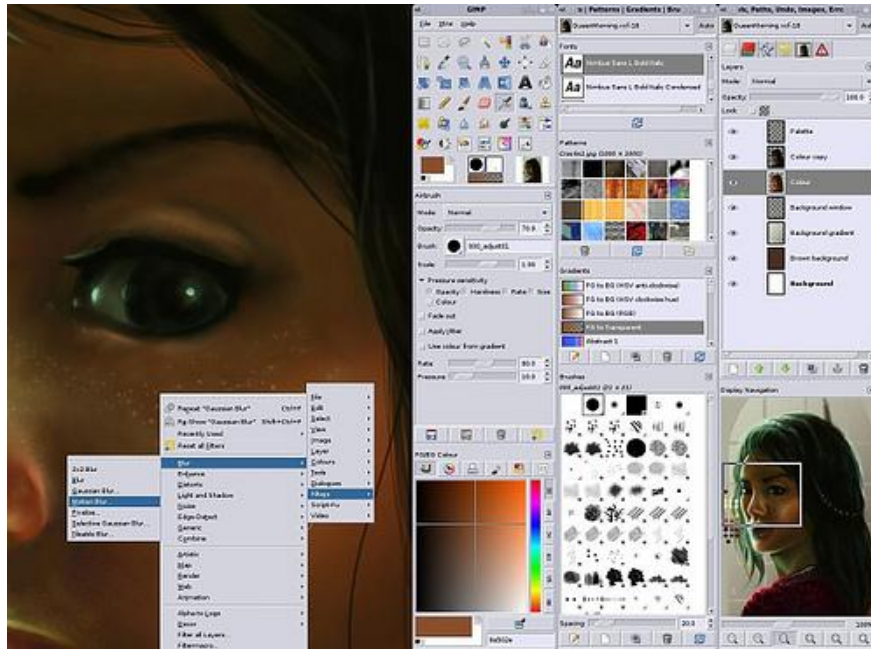
Account Name	Description	Total
Assets	Assets	\$12,846.98
Current Assets	Current Assets	\$12,846.98
Cash in Wallet	Cash in Wallet	\$222.09
Checking Account	Checking Account	\$83.18
Savings Account	Savings Account	\$12,541.71
Equity	Equity	\$11,547.85
Expenses	Expenses	\$3,511.80
Adjustment	Adjustment	\$0.00
Auto	Auto	\$0.00
Bank Service Charge	Bank Service Charge	\$9.95
Books	Books	\$0.00
Cable	Cable	\$81.99
Charity	Charity	\$200.00
Clothing	Clothing	\$0.00

At the bottom of the window, a summary bar shows: \$, grand total: Assets: \$12,846.98 Profits: \$1,299.13

GNUCash is a free program for personal and small business accounting. It tracks bank accounts (including investments), revenue and expenses. Its features include tracking for customers, vendors, jobs, invoices, accounts payable, accounts receivable and detailed reporting, as well. You can import all your current data from programs such as Microsoft Money and Quicken, and you can also export data to spreadsheets, including Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

Since accounting software is so integral to a business's bottom line, this might be something you'd want to test first before you make a full commitment to switching. If you've got a good grasp of other accounting programs, GnuCash will be second nature to you; however, if you're new to such programs, reviews suggest you'll still have a fairly easy time grasping its concepts, features and uses.

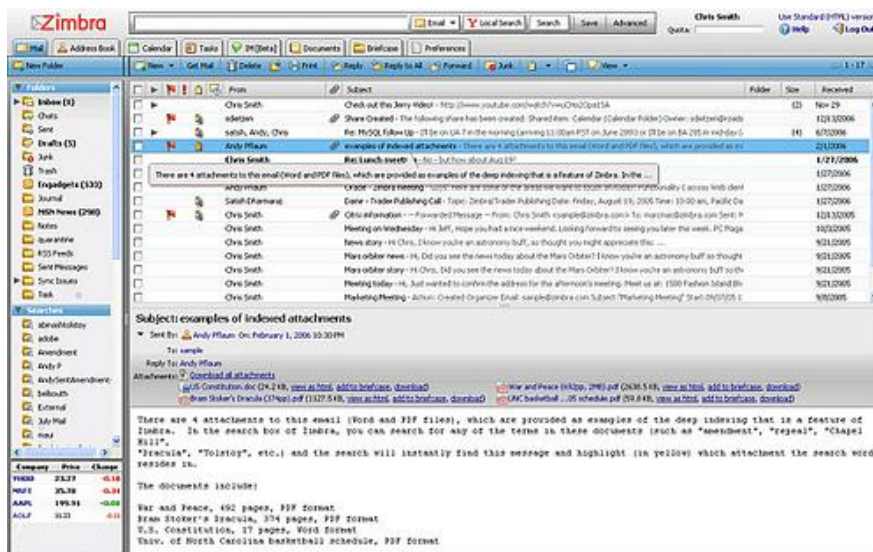
3. *GIMP*



GIMP is a free Photoshop substitute that will satisfy all but the most demanding professional graphic designers. If you need to make simple web graphics, retouch a few product photos, or create flyers or other marketing materials, this program should work nicely for you. It's robust, and if you've used Photoshop or Photoshop-like clone programs, the interface and commands will be familiar to you. The images you create can be saved in an array of common formats, including PSD Photoshop files, in case you need to send your files to a Photoshop user.

All in all, GIMP might be the single greatest money-saver on this list. It's completely free, whereas a single Photoshop license—which you'll need to pay for again each time Adobe releases a new version of the software—can cost hundreds of dollars per user.

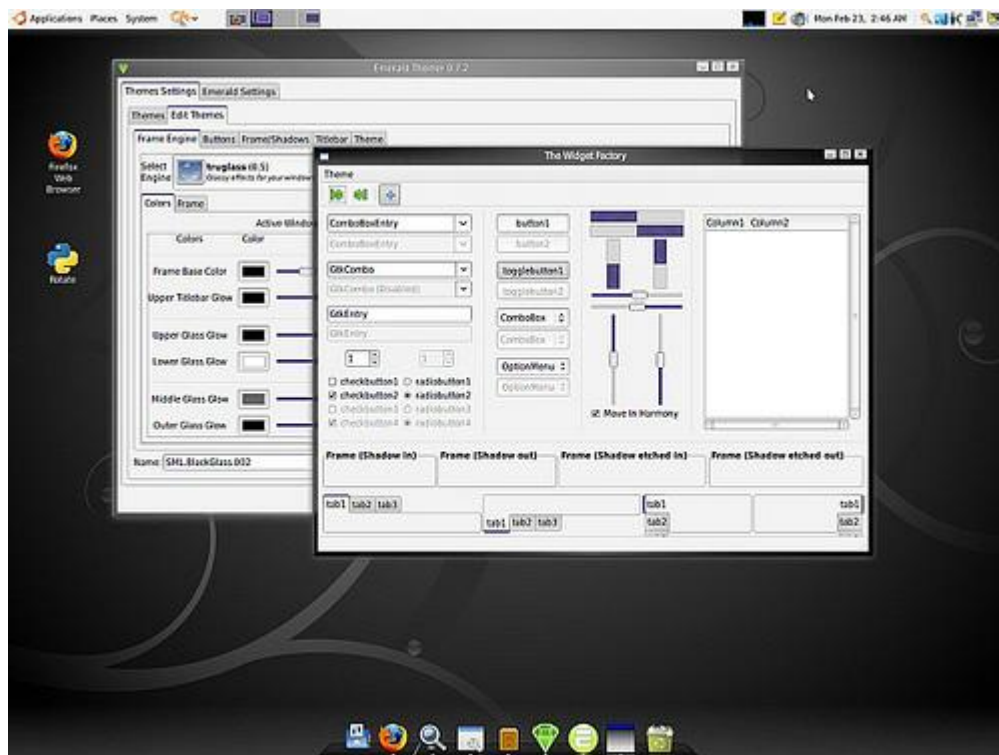
4. Zimbra



If you want a Microsoft Exchange-level email program for your business, including web, mobile and desktop email clients, but you don't want to pay the licensing fees, you might consider Zimbra as an alternative. Its FOSS version is free of charge and available for immediate download. It's compatible with most operating systems, including Mac and Windows, and it includes an address book, a calendar, document support and a task-management app, among other features.

This app also integrates natively with other mail clients, such as Outlook and Apple Mail. Lastly, Zimbra also uses a standards-based approach that supports POP, IMAP, iCal and more for importing email and calendar data from other programs.

5. Linux



Sometimes called GNU/Linux, this family of operating systems is versatile, free, easy to customize, stable, beautiful, frequently updated and—let's say it again—completely and utterly free, regardless of how many devices or users install it.

For years, there's been the commonly held idea that Linux OSes are command-line intensive, difficult to use, easy to crash and generally for nerds only. Much of this "*fear, uncertainty and doubt*" has come from corporate entities that benefit most from these drastic misperceptions. While you might want to reach out for a little help when installing your Linux OS for the first time, you'll be shocked at how simple and user-friendly a Linux distro (that's short for "distribution," the Linux term for version) can be. The

interfaces are elegant and intuitive, much more so than even Windows or Mac for many users.

If you're concerned about not being able to find programs that will run on a Linux machine, you can run any Windows applications you need by using Wine, a Windows emulator (*[view video here](#)*).

Clearly, installing an entirely new operating system is a bigger commitment than switching from MS Office to OpenOffice, but the rewards (and the short- and long-term savings) are much, much greater. If you're hesitant about making the commitment, try installing a distro such as Ubuntu on a personal laptop or netbook until you get a feel for it and are confident it will work for your business.

Image credit: seeminglee